Policy Matters! Wholistically Supporting Indigenous Students' Journey to and Through Canadian Post-secondary Education

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, Canadian post-secondary institutions have been developing specific programs, supports, and services to support Indigenous student access to and persistence through post-secondary education. Part of the ongoing work of decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization is challenging a colonially imposed definition of success (e.g., GPA, degree completion within 4 years) to consider Indigenous students' experiences and their success more wholistically. This project aimed to identify how Indigenous student success is supported by institutional policies, programs, and practices. The research process included conducting an Indigenous qualitative content analysis of 74 universities and 158 colleges (i.e., public, English, and French) websites along with six semi-structured interviews with various program providers. This article examines how Canadian post-secondary institutions can wholistically support Indigenous students' educational journeys through effective policies, programs, and practices that enhance access, facilitate transitions, and foster persistence. The analysis found 47 access, 64 transition, and 50 persistence programs specifically for Indigenous students. The analysis also raised crucial questions related to program sustainability. Further research is needed to understand the impact of these initiatives on the persistence of the next seven generations.

Keywords: Indigenous education, higher education, persistence, institutional policy, decolonization, Indigenization

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, Canadian post-secondary institutions have been dedicating increasing resources to support the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students (Pidgeon, 2016a; Stonechild, 2006); however, the disparity gap between the post-secondary completion rates of non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples remains. This gap begins with the ongoing systemic and societal barriers facing Indigenous peoples throughout Canada's K-12 educational system (e.g., racism, intergenerational trauma due to residential schools, teacher biases, deficit thinking, and differences between on-reserve and off-reserve schooling) that limit their choices and access to post-secondary (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Richards, 2018; Riley & Pidgeon, 2018; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015b; Whitley, 2014). The gap continues with the replication of these societal and systemic barriers across the post-secondary system, such as a lack of financial support, racism and biases, and a lack of housing and affordable childcare (Archibald et al., 1995, 2004; Pidgeon, 2014; Stonechild, 2006; Waterman et al., 2018). For Canadian higher education to meaningfully engage in the work of decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization, intentional policy, program, and practice shifts are required.

These adjustments are necessary to support Indigenous students' pathways to and through college and university.

As a research team comprised of Indigenous (Pidgeon, Tobin) and settler (Leveille, Ghag, Dunn) researchers, we engage in the practice of self-location, responding to Kovach's (2021) call for those working within Indigenous research to situate themselves. As visitors, we are honoured to work and live on the ancestral, unceded, and occupied territories of the Coast Salish peoples, Tsleil-Waututh *(səl̓ ilw̓ətaʔɬ),* Kwikwetlem *(kʷikʷəƛ̓əm),* Squamish *(Sḵwx̱ wú7mesh Uxwumixw),* Musqueam *(xʷməθkʷəy̓əm),* Katzie, Kwantlen, Qayqayt, and Tsawwassen First Nations. Joe Tobin is of Nlaka'pamux and mixed First Nation and settler ancestries; he has been living and working in the Coast Salish territories since 1996. As an older adult, he completed his master's in counselling from SFU in 2022, exploring the experiences of Indigenous counsellors integrating cultural practices within public counselling settings. He finds it rewarding to have the ability to affect systemic change through community projects as well as individual change through counselling. As a first-generation post-secondary graduate from a working-class background, Andrea Leveille is guided by a lens of equity and social construction of meaning. Her education and work have been shaped by her status as a White cis-gender settler born on Kanien'kehá꞉ka land who later moved to land stewarded by the Coast Salish peoples, and those experiences have fostered a commitment to collaborative dialogue, mutual respect, and the creation of narratives that reflect the diverse voices within a group. Donna Dunn is a British settler who moved with her children from England to the Coast Salish territories in 2014; she completed an undergraduate degree at SFU. Donna currently works in child protection as an assistant program manager. Donna became part of the research team as part of her commitment and responsibility to move towards reconciliation through an understanding of the histories and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Mindy Ghag is a settler of South Asian ancestry, born and raised on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Stó꞉lō peoples. Mindy completed a master's degree in counselling psychology from the University of British Columbia in 2022. Her work is guided by a curiosity about the intersections of colonialism, identity, mental health, and ageing. Dr. Pidgeon has been working at the intersections of Indigenous education, student affairs and services, and higher education for over two decades with the aim to transform post-secondary systems to empower and support Indigenous student success. She is of Mi'kmaq ancestry and mixed settler ancestries and is a professor at Simon Fraser University (SFU). She was invited to lead this research team of the Pathways Project as part of SFU's commitment to the TRC (2015a) Calls to Action.

As researchers, we are calling for ongoing systemic transformation while also recognizing the significant changes in Canadian Indigenous higher education since the 1960s. Notably, these changes were a result of the amendments to the Indian Act (R.S.C., 1985) that removed the enfranchisement for pursuing post-secondary education, which created more opportunities for Indigenous post-secondary participation (Stonechild, 2006). Alongside this federal policy change were intentional changes in K-12 education for Indigenous learners and the establishment of the federal Aboriginal Post-Secondary Support Funds (Stonechild, 2006; White et al., 2009). Since that time, the number of Indigenous students completing high school has been on the rise, though lower amongst those attending on-reserve schools (Louie & Gereluk, 2021; Richards, 2018). More diverse Indigenous-specific programs, courses, and services at the post-secondary level have meant increasing enrolment and progress, albeit slowly, in overall attainment rates. However, during this same time, non-Indigenous Canadians have also had increased success across their K-12 and post-secondary educational completion rates, which means the ongoing disparity continues (Statistics Canada, 2018, 2022). Thus, the central challenge in achieving equity in educational attainment for Indigenous peoples lies in the necessity for extensive efforts across the entire educational system to dismantle systemic and societal barriers hindering Indigenous people from obtaining both K-12 and post-secondary education.

This article aims to share how Canadian post-secondary institutions, through policy, programs, and practices, can support Indigenous access to, transition into, and ultimately, completion of their educational journey. In lifting these efforts, we evoke TRC (2015a) Calls to Action, Call to Action #7, #10, and #11. Call #7 underscores the imperative of bridging the educational and employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, emphasizing the importance of programs that facilitate access to and completion of university, college, or trade credentials. Call #10 speaks to the need for new Indigenous educational legislation that addresses several core systemic issues in the education system. Call #10 also

asks the post-secondary system to address achievement gaps, educational attainment levels, and develop culturally relevant curricula. Call #11 urges the federal government to rectify financial disparities in funding available to First Nations pursuing post-secondary education. Each of these Calls to Action underscores the need for increased accountability from both post-secondary institutions and the federal government in supporting Indigenous student success. Additionally, the Métis Accord objectives 1.1.3 and 1.1.4 call for advancing reconciliation interests and aspirations of the Métis nation while also remedying the colonial attitudes found in legislation, policy, and practices. The federal government and the Métis Nation specified that education, K-12, post-secondary, and Métis Nation educational institutes are the initial priorities to be addressed under these objectives (Canada and the Métis National Council, 2019).

The literature review offers insights into Indigenous understandings of success by centering Indigenous worldviews and provides guiding definitions of what we mean by access, transition, and persistence. The literature review also shares the lessons learned about the Indigenous student experience in relationship with Indigenous-specific programming. We then provide an overview of the methodology and broader research project from which we are drawing our data, including the analysis and relational process undertaken in this work. In the findings section, we focus on three key elements: policies, programs, and practices. Examination of policies, ranging from strategic plans to institutional policies concerning access, transition, and persistence, allows for the identification of potential gaps or opportunities for change. Our analysis of Canadian university and college programs and initiatives explores how programs (and related policies) can work to wholistically support Indigenous student success. We intentionally spell wholistically with a "W" to evoke an Indigenous understanding of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural needs of a student (Pidgeon, 2016). This analysis also highlights the resources (or lack thereof) being directed at sustaining such programming, and most importantly, practices that empower Indigenous students. We conclude with a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature and offer recommendations for future research, policy development, and practices to wholistically support Indigenous student access, transition, and persistence.

Literature Review

This literature review shares research stories and experiences that shed light on Indigenous understandings of success and the journey of Indigenous students to and through post-secondary education, encompassing their access, transition, and persistence.

Indigenous Understandings of Success

Indigenous worldviews shape and inform what it means for Indigenous peoples to be successful in life, including their pursuit of higher education. Walking in two worlds is often evoked to acknowledge that Canada's educational system is a colonial construct, and underscores the burden placed on Indigenous students to balance their Indigenous worldviews while learning within the Western-dominated system (Andrade, 2014; Barney & Williams, 2021; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, 2010; Brayboy, 2005a, 2005b; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Eglash et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2022; Sallaffie et al., 2021). Indigenous scholars like Marie Battiste (2013) and Shelia Cote-Meek (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020) have argued that education can be a tool for decolonization—one that centers, respects, and uplifts Indigenous ways of knowing and being to support Indigenous student success.

Wholistic notions of success are interconnected and intergenerational. While Western notions of success may be tied to individual goals, academic achievement, and economic returns (e.g., employment), for many Indigenous learners, success is interconnected with their families, extended kin networks, and communities. Indigenous students often think of their success as a responsibility to give back to their communities, to be role models for others, and of course, to make a better life for themselves and their families (Duder et al., 2022; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Makomenaw, 2014; Pidgeon, 2008). The intergenerational relationships embedded in how they think about success are informed by their cultural worldviews. Many Indigenous communities and families uphold the idea that Indigenous knowledge, formed from their beliefs, values, cultural practices, and languages, is foundational for the education of their children (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Battiste, 2005, 2006; HeavyRunner & De-

Celles, 2002; Walton et al., 2020). Indigenous knowledge is also valued by Indigenous students, who want to feel connected to their cultural beliefs and integrate Indigenous knowledge into their pursuit of education (Bergstrom et al., 2003; Duder et al., 2022; Lydster & Murray, 2019).

Furthermore, wholistic supports play a crucial role in Indigenous student success, such as culturally relevant academic preparation in K-12; Indigenous-specific courses and programming in post-secondary; ensuring students see Indigenous role models to know their dreams are possible; supporting their navigation of the institution's services, financial and housing supports; having supportive teachers and peers/mentors throughout their education; and having family that values education (Andrade, 2014; Castagno, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Lee, 2007; Milne et al., 2016; Shotton et al., 2007; Waterman, 2007). When educational institutions and Indigenous communities and families provide comprehensive support, Indigenous students persist in their education even in the face of adversity (Andersen et al., 2017; Deyhle, 1995; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Lee, 2007).

Access, Transition, and Persistence of Indigenous Students

While student experience research in North America has been ongoing since the 1940s (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), this body of work has often neglected or excluded Indigenous perspectives. Yet, with increased participation and presence on campuses, Indigenous student voices have added their important perspective to the college student experience literature in recent decades (e.g., Archibald et al., 1995; Battiste et al., 2002; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2002; Pavel, 1991; Shotton et al., 2013; Stonechild, 2006; Waterman et al., 2018). These next sections speak to the Indigenous student experience during their post-secondary education journey (e.g., access, transition, and persistence).

Access

Our operational definition of access included all of the experiences and life factors that supported Indigenous K-12 students on their journey to being accepted into post-secondary education. The pathways leading to post-secondary must support the physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs of the student (Levin & Alcorn, 1999; Restoule, 2011). The programs and services are often designed to provoke the aspirations of the students involved while building a familiarity with the institution. This possibility-building exists within experiential programming, including summer and day camps, sports programming, and community or school events organized by post-secondary institutions.

Previous research has shown that pedagogical practices that support the wholistic needs of Indigenous students in K-12 result in engagement and success. Connection and culture were identified as key contributors to programming that left Indigenous students feeling supported and seen (Barnes et al., 2022; Barney & Williams, 2021; Jungic & Thompson, 2020; Sallaffie et al., 2021). Recognizing the significance of targeted support during formative years, early experience programs emerged as valuable tools for mitigating disinterest in certain subjects (Jungic & Thompson, 2020) and unveiling untapped potential (Gartner-Manzon & Giles, 2018). By incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and utilizing Indigenous mentors, these experiences not only facilitate academic growth but also affirm the inherent value and worth of Indigenous identity (Barnes et al., 2022; Barney & Williams, 2021; Jungic & Thompson, 2020; Sallaffie et al., 2021). The presence of positive role models within the educational landscape emerges as a cornerstone of support for Indigenous students. Whether through Indigenous teachers, counsellors, or peers, cultural representation plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes by providing visible pathways forward (Britten & Borgen, 2010; Hunt et al., 2010a; Panina-Beard & Vadeboncoeur, 2022; Rawana et al., 2015; Sam et al., 2018; Shotton et al., 2007). The critical role of cultural representation underscores the importance of fostering positive peer support and role models throughout Indigenous students' educational journeys, regardless of their age. Incorporating culturally relevant pedagogical practices further enhances Indigenous students' educational experiences, fostering wholistic growth and development (Anthony et al., 2018; Belanger et al., 2008; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Brown & Begoray, 2017; Cameron, 2009; Frawley et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2015; McKeown et al., 2018; McNamara & Naepi, 2018; McPhee et al., 2017; Parent, 2011; Ray & Cormier, 2012; Reetz & Quackenbush, 2016; Riecken et al., 2006).

However, despite the strides made in fostering inclusive educational environments, a myriad of bar-

riers persist, hindering Indigenous children and youth from accessing these early transformative experiences (Anuik et al., 2010; Axworthy et al., 2016; Dalley, 2018). Removing those barriers is a responsibility that universities and colleges can take on to help Indigenous youth see post-secondary education as a place where they belong and can achieve their dreams.

Transition

Since the 1970s, research around student transition has been growing and has provided a clearer picture of the factors that help and hinder students from access, recruitment, admission, transition, retention, and completion of college or university (Astin, 1993; Gore et al., 2017; Holmes, 2005; Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004; Restoule et al., 2013). We conceptualized transition as including the policies, services, and programs designed to support new students into and through their first year of college or university.

Typically, transition programs serve three populations of aspiring post-secondary students. High school students going into college or university (aka direct entry), college-to-university transfer students, and older adults entering or re-entering college or university after an educational hiatus. Indigenous students have often had negative experiences in the K-12 school system, impacting their views of future education, and are often paired with systemic and personal challenges such as economic disparity, experience with racism, and lack of familial understanding or support (Howard et al., 2021; Mathew et al., 2023; Parent, 2017). Thus, one of the aims of post-secondary transition programs is to help challenge and repair negative perceptions of self and post-secondary education through skill-building and exploration of future possibilities (Andersen et al., 2017; Lydster & Murray, 2019; Makomenaw, 2014; Parent, 2017). One effective factor of transition programs is encouraging personal connections with fellow students and staff and ensuring culturally relevant mentoring experiences are available. These relationship-building practices have all been linked to positive transition experiences and success for Indigenous students (Barney & Williams, 2021; Parent, 2011, 2017; Restoule et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2010). Relational, growth-orientated programs not only support the transition process but are also vital to Indigenous student' persistence in their education.

Persistence

We examined the concept of persistence from a wholistic lens and focused on a variety of factors that support and influence an Indigenous student's journey through the higher education system. Persistence considers what programs and supports are available to Indigenous students beyond their first year. While the literature may speak to these as retention services (e.g., helping students stay to completion of a degree), we understood from previous research (Archibald et al., 2010) that Indigenous students are likely to attend multiple institutions over their post-secondary journey. We preferred the term persistence because the focus was not on institutional retention rates but rather on what supports and services encouraged students to reach their educational goals. This framing recognizes that Indigenous student persistence involves students persevering through a system that is not always designed to support their individual needs or identities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Tachine et al., 2017). This definition of persistence, in relation to Indigenous students, identifies the need to move beyond simplistic efforts focused on the retention of Indigenous students and move towards actively supporting their well-being, progress, and transition throughout higher education on to their careers.

Numerous studies have identified the importance of post-secondary institutions recognizing and honouring factors and cultural practices that support the wholistic well-being of Indigenous students (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021; Shotton et al., 2013; Waterman et al., 2018). Some of these factors and practices include the presence of Indigenous faculty, staff, and students on campuses, access to Elders, and the inclusion of Indigenous content and methodologies in the curricula (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Uink et al., 2019). Indigenous students identified that peer support allowed them to feel less isolated and helped them overcome obstacles during their academic pursuits, including how to deal with racism on campus (Uink et al., 2019; Walton et al., 2020). Furthermore, such wrap-around services offered during the access and transition phases also continue to support their persistence. Examples include welcoming and safe campus spaces often provided by Indigenous student services (Rossingh & Dunbar, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017), financial resources (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Windchief et al., 2018), and housing, particularly family housing (Ecklund & Terrance, 2013; Pidgeon & Rogerson, 2017). Conceptualizing support beyond bare minimum resources – whether housing, financial, and/or extend-

ed support networks is even more important for those Indigenous students who are also parents (Cox & Pidgeon, 2022; Minthorn et al., 2022).

Post-secondary institutions must continue to actively address barriers, whether through financial assistance or logistical support, to ensure equitable access for Indigenous students. Moreover, building meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities is paramount in addressing historical distrust and fostering collaborative partnerships (Anuik et al., 2010; Axworthy et al., 2016; Panina-Beard & Vadeboncoeur, 2022; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). This connection-building is particularly true for rural and remote communities, where gaps in education quality and limited proximity to post-secondary institutions present unique challenges (Anuik et al., 2010; Henderson et al., 2015; Parent, 2017).

The interconnections between the Indigenous student experience and the 3Ps (policies, programs, and practices) are the spaces in which this research project is situated and, ultimately, aims to contribute to the post-secondary system's ongoing transformation in wholistically supporting Indigenous students. The next section provides an overview of the Indigenous Qualitative Content Analysis (IQCA) and research process.

Methodology

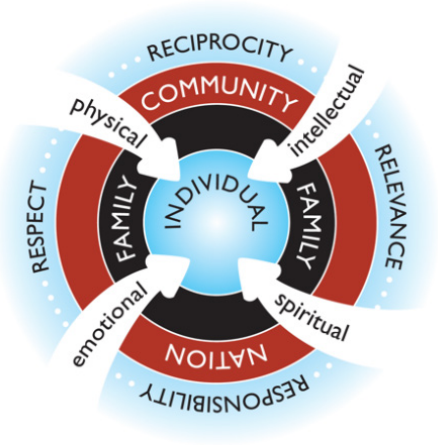
We, as a team of Indigenous (Tobin, Pidgeon) and settler researchers (Dunn, Ghag, Leveille), were asked to undertake a research project to help a Western Canadian university better understand the educational and career needs of local Indigenous Nations with the aim of supporting Indigenous access to, transition within, and persistence through the institution (Pidgeon et al., 2020).

During the Pathways Project (2018-2020), we conducted a national environmental scan aimed at understanding the programs, policies, and practices used in Canadian public post-secondary institutions to support Indigenous learners' educational journeys. A delimitation of the study was the exclusion of academic-focused programs from our dataset. In addition, we conducted interviews and sharing circles (e.g., culturally informed sharing circles) with 200 participants, including university faculty, staff, students, local school district personnel, and Indigenous youth and community members. Interviews and sharing circles were semi-structured and guided by participant knowledge and experiences related to Indigenous students and/or programs and services. For the Pathways Project, potential participants were invited if their roles and responsibilities included supporting Indigenous students. For example, education coordinators from our host Nations, program coordinators of Indigenous programs across the country, along with SFU employees whose portfolios related to supporting Indigenous students in some way. Our process upheld the 4Rs within the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF; Figure 1), for example, each participant was gifted tobacco and a small honorarium for their sharing. Honouring relationships was an important part of our research process, so participants had multiple ways to provide feedback throughout the process to ensure the recommendations were relevant and inclusive of their perspectives.

To comprehensively assess resources available to prospective Indigenous post-secondary learners and their families, we analyzed publicly available information on institutional websites, examining policies and programs related to Indigenous students' access, transition, and persistence. Our analysis drew on both website content and interviews with six leaders of exemplary Indigenous programming across Canada. These interviews provided insightful connections between policy, programming, and practice. The team conducted an Indigenous Qualitative Content Analysis (IQCA), modelled after Riley and Pidgeon's (2018) approach, to examine the text and visual representation of public English and French post-secondary institutions (74 universities, 156 colleges). Our analysis was guided by the IWF (Figure 1), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the student, their family, community, university/college environment, and Nation, while also accounting for their wholistic needs across physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. We also used the IWF to support the analysis of the interview transcripts from six participants who specifically offered wholistic Indigenous programming we were interested in learning more about (beyond what was provided on their websites). The quantitative representation of our analysis strengthened our findings by illustrating the distribution and prevalence of Indigenous programs and policies across Canadian post-secondary institutions. This national overview helped identify both promising practices and potential gaps in institutional support for Indigenous learners. The power of the IWF is supporting the telling of stories that combine quantitative and qualitative

data. We also recognize that nuances between institution type (e.g., colleges and universities) and provincial/territorial policies also tell an important story within this analysis.

Figure 1
Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF)



The IWF incorporates the 4Rs of Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991; Pidgeon, 2008), respect for Indigenous knowledge, relevance of programs and services, reciprocity, and respectful relationships. Guided by these principles, we systematically coded institutional website content to ascertain the presence and nature of specific access, transition, and persistence initiatives tailored to Indigenous students. Programs were coded for details about program objectives, learning outcomes, supports, target demographics, program duration, associated costs, staffing arrangements, cultural components, and incorporation of Indigenous-focused curricula. These were further categorized based on their alignment with the physical, emotional, cultural, or intellectual realms. Our coding process was emergent, with ongoing member checks and discussions among research assistants to ensure consistency and rigour. We also identified some exemplary programs based on our review of the literature, institutional program reputation, and the Indigenous Qualitative Content Analysis (IQCA).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of our research process. Institutional websites, although valuable sources of information, often present challenges in terms of navigation, accessibility, and reliability. Despite efforts to maintain accuracy, the dynamic nature of web content meant that information retrieved at the onset of our study might have evolved or become obsolete over time. Additionally, our study scope was confined to Canadian public post-secondary institutions and excluded private institutions. Indigenous Institutes of Adult and Higher Learning were not included in our review due to their mandates to support Indigenous learners and communities with culturally relevant services and programs. Despite these limitations, we believe that the robustness of the sampling and our analysis yield valuable insights into the landscape of Indigenous support initiatives across Canadian public post-secondary education.

Connecting Policies, Programs, and Practices

At the national level, various policies exert influence on Indigenous post-secondary education. The first and foremost is the Indian Act (R.S.C., 1985), which, since 1867, has dictated the relationship of First Nations to the Crown and the inherent responsibilities of the federal government to Indigenous K-12 education. However, it is evident in this federal policy that the government views Indigenous post-secondary education as a social responsibility, not a legal one, with federal resources for higher education primarily channeled through provincial and territorial authorities (Paquette & Fallon, 2010; Stonechild, 2006). We have witnessed how national reports (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; TRC, 2015b) have played pivotal roles in shaping post-secondary education's supporting Indigenous student participation over time (Pidgeon, 2016b; Stonechild, 2006). Within Canadian higher education, the policy gaps, resistances, and windows (i.e., opportunities) are all at play when we consider advancing

decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization. For example, the TRC (2015a) Calls to Action created policy windows that influenced the formation of the Indigenous Education Protocol (CPRIL), a national college statement whereby signatories commit to upholding the TRC Calls to Action. Some universities have responded with institution-specific commitments, such as Walk This Path with Us (SFU Aboriginal Reconciliation Council, 2017). The gap in policy related to Indigenous identity for targeted funds or employment opportunities is a long-standing gap that has now shifted to an opportunity to enact change that empowers Indigenous-led policy and practice changes (e.g., Government of Canada, 2024; University of Saskatchewan, n.d.). Post-secondary institutional responses to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007) and the TRC report (2015b) must also consider their responsibilities to the Canada-Métis Accord (Government of Canada, 2017), which has opened another policy window to specifically advance Métis post-secondary education. The next section highlights the development of Indigenous strategic plans as a direct response to reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization.

Indigenous Strategic Plans

In the context of Canadian universities and colleges, strategic plans serve as roadmaps outlining institutional missions and objectives, typically over a five-year period. Influenced by the culture of the institution, its purpose, and, of course, the senior leadership and broader institutional community (Chica & Alvarez, 2024; Kotler & Murphy, 1981), these plans are crucial for setting organizational priorities. We also acknowledge that such institutional plans should not be the end (Gordon & Fischer, 2015; Snyder, 2015) but rather be an iterative tool for decolonizing and Indigenizing programs and services. In reviewing institutional websites for Indigenous-specific programs and services, we found that 61 of 155 colleges (39%) and 58 of 74 universities (78%) had a specific Indigenous Strategic Plan during the time period of the Pathways Project. Yet, from our analysis of institutional websites (as discussed in later sections), a greater number of institutions still offered targeted programs and services for Indigenous students.

In the absence of explicit Indigenous strategic plans, questions arise regarding how institutions are upholding their commitments to the TRC (2015b) and United Nations (2007) through the allocation of resources to support Indigenous student success. This information was hard to ascertain from website data, institutional strategic plans, or Indigenous strategic plans. We uncovered instances where programs were initially available but discontinued within a year. Research shows that Indigenous initiatives without long-term funding often face precarious futures—short-term funding along with the reliance on external funds (e.g., the federal government, private donors) means there is no permanency to financing Indigenous initiatives, so such initiatives disappear once the funding ends (Aquash, 2013; Bell, 2013; Paquette & Fallon, 2010). Indeed, insights from interview participants underscored the importance of financial commitments to signal institutional priorities. A participant who worked in Indigenous access programming noted a colleague had said to them, "If you're gonna say that something is really important, then you need to have a budget attached to it," which they agreed with. They continued by saying, "If you're gonna say you wanna move things forward, then show me the money so I can actually do what I need to do, right?" (Participant07 from the Pathways Project). They noted that the entire staff of their program had been on year-to-year contracts for a long time, and questioned, "How are you showing us that we're valuable and these programs are valuable if you're not committing to us" (Participant07 from the Pathways Project). The entire team had recently been made permanent employees, which certainly affirmed their value and place at the institutions. Strategic plans, therefore, play a crucial role in signaling institutional values and priorities, driving initiatives like the establishment of senior leadership positions dedicated to Indigenous affairs. As another participant in our interviewees shared, they were able to advance the work in supporting Indigenous students as a result of various groups working together and supported by directives within their institutional strategic plan.

In reviewing the institutional strategic plans and understanding their role in directing the core activities of the universities and colleges, our analysis for this article set out to map the specific policies, programs and services available to Indigenous students throughout their journey (e.g., access, transition, and persistence). These findings have implications for the practices of wholistic support for Indigenous student success.

From Policies to Programs

In our review of institutional websites for the policies, programs and services available to support Indigenous students' journeys to and through university or college (Table 1), we found that of the 74 universities in Canada, approximately 42 % had some form of access programs (e.g., summer camps or day camps), 51% had specific transition programs for Indigenous learners (e.g., first-year programming), and 34% had some form of persistence programming (e.g., peer-mentoring, tutor support; cultural activities and programs, Elders programming). In terms of the 156 public colleges, 11% had access programming, 18% had transition programming, and 16% had persistence programming.

Table 1

Indigenous-specific Access, Transition, and Persistence Programming in Canada Public Post-secondary Institutions

NATIONAL*	*N*	Access		Transition		Persistence	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
Universities	74	30	42	36	51	24	34
Colleges	156	17	11	28	18	26	16
Total	230						

Note*: Some institutions have more than one program—so the total counts will not equal 100%**.** These counts are based on institutional websites in 2018-2020 and may not be reflective of any changes, additions, or updates since then.

In analyzing the data regionally (Table 2), there are marked differences between provinces and territories. These differences may be due in part to the variance in post-secondary institutions per province or territory, as well as influenced by institutional and provincial government responses to Indigenous-specific programs and services. For example, we can compare British Columbia and Ontario—two provinces with a high number of institutions and yet different policy contexts. In 1990, based on a provincial report commonly known as the Green Report, British Columbia provided funding for the development of Indigenous-specific student services in colleges and universities (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 1990). On November 28, 2019, during our Pathways Project, British Columbia signed on to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring its post-secondary sector adheres to the rights and responsibilities of Indigenous education (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2019). While the impact of enshrining the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into British Columbia law was not measurable at the time of this study, it does reinforce the generally supportive position the provincial government has taken with Indigenous education. In British Columbia, 42% of universities and 40% of colleges offer access programming, and 67% of universities and 33% of colleges provide transition programs. Another 67% of universities and 53% of colleges offer persistence programs in British Columbia. In contrast, Ontario's provincial policy response to Indigenous education has been less than supportive (e.g., removing support for more inclusion of Indigenous content in the K-12 curriculum in 2018). The 2023 *Still Waiting for Truth and Reconciliation: A Progress Report on Indigenous Education in Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools* shows how little advancement has been made with regard to curriculum inclusion and other Calls to Action (People for Education, 2023). While the report focused on the K-12 system, it demonstrated the gaps in support within the Ontario education system, which then fall to the post-secondary sector to fill. While more Ontario universities provided access programming (e.g., 55% of universities and 15% of colleges) compared to British Columbia institutions, when we compared transition and persistence programming, slightly fewer Ontario universities offered transition (50%) and persistence (32%) programming, while Ontario colleges were less likely to offer transition programming (26%) but focused on persistence programming (52%). The policy contexts within these two provinces are in constant flux depending on the political party in power and federal support through education transfer dollars, which have ripple effects on provincial/territorial policies and related resources (and support) they dedicate to post-secondary

education. These external factors illustrate how important it is for institutions to develop policies and practices that remain resilient in the face of such changes.

Table 2

Access, Transition, and Persistence Programming by Institution and Province/Territory

Province/Territory	Total Institutions		Access		Transition		Persistence	
	U	C	U	C	U	C	U	C
British Columbia	12	15	5	6	8	5	8	8
Alberta	8	15	3	0	6	7	2	1
Saskatchewan	2	10	1	5	2	3	2	1
Manitoba	4	4	2	1	3	2	2	1
Ontario	22	27	12	4	11	7	7	14
Quebec	12	73	2	0	1	2	1	0
Prince Edward Island	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nova Scotia	8	3	3	0	2	1	2	0
New Brunswick	4	4	1	0	2	1	0	0
Newfoundland and Labrador	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
Yukon	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NWT	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nunavut	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-

U = University; C = College

Thinking wholistically about the Indigenous student experience allows us to see how institutional policies, such as admissions, financial aid and bursaries, and housing, are central to their transition and persistence. As the literature identified financial need and housing as barriers to Indigenous student persistence, we determined that these two policy areas warrant further investigation, as they have an overarching reach across student experience. Our analysis revealed apparent policy gaps, particularly related to housing.

Only five universities had specific policies that related to reserved seats and/or placements for Indigenous students in on-campus housing, and there were different models of housing provided. For example, there were living-learning communities at the University of Regina, SFU had 22 rooms within its Indigenous Cultural House, and Mount Royal University had dedicated Indigenous housing. The University of Victoria was one of the few institutions that had both single and family accommodations for Indigenous students. Two colleges had Indigenous-specific residences (e.g., Chinook Residence at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology [SAIT]) or dedicated seats for Indigenous students (e.g., Algonquin College reserved 20 rooms for Indigenous students). While these numbers are low, they represent an increase in the number of institutions with offerings compared to what has previously been available for Indigenous housing at Canadian post-secondary institutions (Pidgeon & Rogerson, 2017).

Within financial policies, many institutions have adopted a third-party policy to support Indigenous students with funding from their First Nation band or another sponsor. Of the 118 institutions (58 universities and 60 colleges and polytechnics), there were four main categories of financial support: financial aid (e.g., federal loan program), bursaries (e.g., need-based), scholarships and awards (e.g., merit-based), and emergency funds. In our review of institutional websites, we noted that several Indigenous student services units, often called Indigenous Student Centers (ISC), provide a liaison between the institutions' Financial Aid and Awards office and Indigenous students. The ISCs were usually offering programs of support (e.g., websites or tools to navigate finding funding, providing workshops on how to apply for funding).

In understanding the national landscape of these programs and overarching policies, the next sections describe more specific connections of policies to access, transition, and persistence programming. We highlight programs that were deemed exemplary in that they provided wholistic support—physical, emotional, cultural, and intellectual.

Access Policies and Programs

Access, or early experience programs for Indigenous children and youth, align with post-secondary policies focused on decolonization, reconciliation, and indigenization. These programs can serve to familiarize Indigenous youth and their parents with university spaces and the specific admissions pathways and support for Indigenous students. Additionally, funding initiatives and partnerships between universities, industry, and Indigenous communities have created early experience programs that foster supportive environments for Indigenous children and youth to thrive culturally and academically.

Several programs demonstrate the efficacy of integrating Indigenous ways of being and knowing into access programs, enhancing student engagement and curiosity. In business, a program housed at Cape Breton University stands as an exemplar in this regard. This initiative pairs Indigenous youth in grades 10 through 12 with Indigenous business mentors, immersing them in a year-long series of business challenges. Complimentary provision of smartphones or tablets facilitates student participation in these challenges. Emphasizing skill development and career exploration, the program's initial success led to its expansion across the Atlantic provinces in 2023. Memorial University's The Healers of Tomorrow summer camps and Vancouver Island University's Thuy'she'num Tu Smun'eem summer camps provide further models of inclusive programming with minimal financial barriers. These camps feature multi-day, overnight experiences, free of charge, including meals and lodging. Memorial University extends its support to cover travel expenses. Both camps interweave Indigenous cultural knowledge and pedagogical approaches, community involvement, and education and career planning, catering to youth ranging from Grade 8 to early college or university.

Transition Policies and Programs

Transition programs create a network of support for Indigenous students, built upon access programs and overlapping with persistence programming. Partnerships with Indigenous nations (often referred to as an Indian Band or simply Band) and other third-party agreements (funding or admissions – J-treaty access, etc.) play a key role in getting students into the institution. At this phase, admissions policies specific to Indigenous students become critical to prevent gatekeeping and lower barriers for Indigenous students. Indigenous students transitioning into the institution also require housing and financial support during their first year. Ensuring these policies are present is particularly important, as the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2018) pointed out, there are inherent systematic biases and errors at the federal level in reporting and acting upon Indigenous transition data, resulting in inconsistent funding for Indigenous students. One participant emphasized the significance of transition programs, particularly those focused on academic skill building and upgrading, and felt "that the federal government should be paying for preparatory courses at all postsecondary institutions since they're not paying for appropriate high school education in band-funded schools" (Participant03 from Pathways Project). Financial aid, housing policies, and student support programs, like dedicated Indigenous spaces on campus and family-friendly housing options, foster a sense of belonging and support Indigenous students throughout their educational journey. Peer support and mentoring programs further build that sense of belonging by connecting students with peers who have successfully navigated similar paths and building the skills needed to support future students in the same way.

In our review of transition programs, we also saw models that incorporated financial support and resources to support student participation. For example, LE,NONET, at the University of Victoria included six programs designed to address the challenges Indigenous students experienced entering post-secondary education (Hunt et al., 2010b). Two of its programs offered financial aid, one offering bursaries and the other, emergency financial aid. These financial supports help alleviate the financial burdens that can hinder Indigenous students' access to higher education. The administration of these programs within Indigenous spaces rather than traditional financial aid offices contributed to their use and effectiveness. In addition, LE,NONET offered a peer mentoring program facilitated by Indigenous staff, which proved beneficial for both new students requiring transition support and their Indigenous mentors, who found

the cultural connection and responsibility gratifying. The apprenticeship program was research-focused and fostered a reciprocal learning environment where students acquired research skills and the research advisors gained knowledge about Indigenous culture and related issues. LE,NONET also offered two community-focused initiatives, including a community internship program providing experiential learning opportunities and financial relief for students. A prerequisite Indigenous student seminar introduced participants to these programs, laying the groundwork for early relationships between students, community members, and agencies. This seminar highlights the program's efficacy in building early relationships between community members, community agencies, and students (Hunt et al., 2010b). Additionally, the University of Victoria's housing program guaranteed 1st-year students access to Indigenous-specific on-campus housing.

Persistence Policies and Programs

There have been significant advancements in program and service offerings that have supported the persistence of Indigenous students in higher education. The policies that support their access and transition in their first year certainly apply to persistence, such as financial aid, housing, and admissions (particularly into professional or graduate programs). The interconnections of policies to their wholistic needs are evident in the exemplary persistence programs. For example, the Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways program at the University of Saskatchewan stood out for its aim of supporting Indigenous students beyond their first year by offering Indigenous-focused courses, academic and career mentorship in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and peer mentorship opportunities throughout students' learning journeys. The program also recognized the differing award timelines for funding and encouraged students to secure their seats and register for courses before they received confirmation of funding.

Discussion

Examining the current landscape of programs and initiatives aimed at supporting Indigenous students across Canadian post-secondary education provides a clearer understanding of the kinds of support and services available to these students. Such a national picture also allows us to see the evolution and ongoing precarity of such services and programs, which face the enduring threat of anti-Indigenous racism and increasingly popular neoliberal policy models. The intersections of the IWF along with the 3Ps (policy, programs, and practices) allowed us to identify the gaps that present opportunities for providing wholistic support to Indigenous students.

The identified gaps between policy and programming raise some concerns in terms of continuity of funding and institutional commitment to Indigenous initiatives and students. From our findings, it is clear that a review of institutional policies—particularly related to admissions, finance, and housing—impacting the overall student experience is vitally important to support Indigenous student success. For example, student financial aid policies can be updated to consider financial need along with merit. Both housing and financial aid should consider that some Indigenous students' time to degree completion typically extends beyond the standard four-year timeframe (McKeown et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2020) and may thus require extended access to such supports and services. Ultimately, institutions can demonstrate their ongoing commitment to Indigenous students through their development of Indigenous strategic plans, which then guide programs and service delivery commitments that are tangible and relevant. We also recognize that policies can provide a framework that is open and responsive to students' needs (e.g., emergency fund policies and culturally responsive policies). Institutional policies then enable advocacy and lobbying at various levels of government, including Indigenous communities, to help them sustain institutional commitments and priorities to Indigenous education.

Policies and programs are inherently connected to practice, particularly as we think about the whole student and their interconnections to their peers, faculty, staff, institutional community, and their own families and communities. Staff and faculty become important actors in supporting Indigenous students' journeys. For example, an admissions committee could undertake training for understanding the wholistic admissions process, or scholarship adjudicators in their assessment instructions could be asked to consider how assessment parameters that combine need and merit, along with other factors that are considerate of Indigenous students' realities and needs. Those working in housing may think about how they

can change their housing application, deposit requirements, and allocation models, along with housing practices (e.g., smudging and ceremonial policies in residence), to encourage more Indigenous students to live on campus. While we did not examine academic programs, our findings have implications for academic faculties and instructors in terms of revising their admissions policies to be inclusive of Indigenous perspectives, incorporating culturally responsive policies within their programming, and supporting Indigenous students to degree completion. As these examples demonstrate, there are numerous ways of enacting wholism along with the 3Ps to advance reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization.

There are limitations and delimitations to our study; notably, the constant revision of institutional websites, which means seeing this national picture as a snapshot in time (2018-2019) is vitally important. We acknowledge that institutional policies, programs, and practices are fluid, and updates since 2019 are not reflected in our data or analysis. Also, while we did look at Indigenous institutions and institutes, we did not include them in our analysis for this paper, as their mission and mandate align with supporting Indigenous students in wholistic and culturally appropriate ways. Given these limitations, opportunities for further inquiry projects emerge, such as the need for longitudinal studies to demonstrate the long-term influence of Indigenous-specific programs and supports on Indigenous students, their families, and communities. Additionally, further research is needed to examine institutional strategic plans to see the connection between these plans and Indigenous student services, particularly in the absence of an Indigenous strategic plan. The connection between policies, programs, and practices remains an ongoing inquiry as we look to transform Canadian higher education for the next seven generations of Indigenous learners.

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